An Informed Approach to Masculinity in Games
## GDI Playbook guidance for video game development

Why does recognizing stereotypes in portrayals matter?

Creative decisions influence our perception of ourselves and others. This includes notions of manhood and masculinity. Creative choices in video games shape how players perceive manhood and masculinity, and can reinforce or challenge gender stereotypes in ways players may not consciously notice.

Creative choices can also influence players' in game behavior. The "Proteus Effect" is the phenomenon where an avatar's characteristics (e.g. their age, attractiveness, height, skin color, or gender) affect players' behaviors, including their levels of extraversion, aggression, and risk-taking.[1]

For example, when players "gender swap" (e.g., play a character with a gender different from their own), their gameplay reveals social expectations linked to a character's gender, such as healing-related behavior.[2]

Men who play female characters 💗⬆ engage in more healing-related behavior.

Women who play male characters 💗⬇ engage in less healing-related behavior.

Be mindful of backstories that rely on common tropes.

The "Hero's Journey" trope is when a protagonist leaves home to seek a reward and returns transformed after their adventure. This trope often prioritizes masculine-coded skills, such as physical strength and violence, while downplaying feminine-coded skills and collaboration, which are less emphasized in these narratives.

The "Marlboro Man" trope involves a male character who is a caricature of traditional masculinity. He is a loner, stoic, and emotionally unavailable. This man often rejects what is popular or conventional, choosing to follow his own path. This trope discourages emotional expression and help-seeking.

1 Yee, N. (2014). The Proteus paradox: How online games and virtual worlds change us-and how they don't. Yale University Press.
2 Yee, N., Ducheneaut, N., Nelson, L., & Likarish, P. (2011, May). Introverted elves and conscientious gnomes: The expression of personality in world of warcraft. In Proceedings of the SIGCHI conference on human factors in computing systems (pp. 753-762).

Consider how character traits and skills can be gender-stereotyped.

Stereotypically masculine skills include leadership, critical thinking, risk-taking, speed, physical strength, shooting, hacking, and combat skills.

Stereotypically feminine skills include sociability, empathy, healing, and magical powers.

Studies find traits that embody agency and independence are more easily attributed to men than women, and that traits that embody nurturing are more easily attributed to women than men.[3]
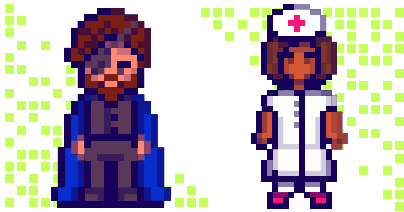
Flip these stereotypes when designing characters by asking yourself these questions:

- Do the male characters in your game have empathy and can they express emotions?
- Do the female characters in your game have the power to control their goals, actions, and destiny?

Positive Portrayal In-Game Example: Witcher 3

While Geralt, the protagonist of *The Witcher* series, exhibits traditionally masculine-coded skills, like being physically dominant and highly skilled in combat, he is also portrayed as a complex, nuanced, and deeply human character. He does not always choose violence; he frequently relies on others, accepts their support, and is supportive and affectionate to those in his care. All of these traits are typically coded as soft or feminine, and not associated with the kind of "man's man" Geralt appears to be on the surface.

Image credit: CD Projekt

3 Scott, K. A. and D. J. Douglas. (2006). "Female First, Leader Second? Gender Bias in the Encoding of Leadership Behavior." Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes. 101 (2): 230-242.

Opportunities to Broaden Portrayals of Masculinity in Game Design

- Examine how male character's visual design reinforces or rejects notions of masculinity. Male-presenting characters are often depicted with exaggerated muscularity, impressive physical size, chiseled jawlines, and well-defined abs. Can these attributes be edited?

- What motivates the male protagonist? Does their backstory involve the violent murder of a beloved woman? Rather than motivating his violence through shame and guilt for not serving as a protector, empower him with a sense of justice or morality.

- Is the "Hero's Journey" trope in your game? A fresh alternative to the tired Hero's-Journey-style narratives is an ensemble cast. Each main character can have a unique backstory, motivations, and abilities that contribute to the overall impact of the story and game experience, which creates a richer, more dynamic narrative while avoiding the predictability of a single protagonist's arc.

- Who is your hero? Design hero characters with a blend of positive masculine and feminine traits to counter the belief that masculine traits signify power while feminine traits indicate weakness.

- What character traits are rewarded? Challenge the notion that masculine-coded skills are more desirable than feminine-coded skills by designing a Hero's Journey that necessitates strength, cunning, creativity, and collaboration. Tie these skills to success in the game.

- When the story allows, show male characters who display a full range of emotions, including joy, sadness, and vulnerability.

- If players can design their own characters, offer gender-neutral options too. Read *The Manosphere, Rewired*, which advocates for allowing players to experiment freely with their appearance and behavior in character design.

4 Brito, P., Hayes, C., Lehrer, R., Mahler, J., & Salinas Groppo, J. (2024). The Manosphere, Rewired: Understanding Masculinities Online & Pathways for Healthy Connection. Washington, DC: Equimundo.